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April 22, 2014

**Re: Your official visit to Azerbaijan (May 11-12, 2014)**

Dear President Hollande,

Your forthcoming visit to Azerbaijan presents an important opportunity to seek human rights improvements. Your visit will be a major event in Azerbaijan, in which the government will be seriously invested. It will closely coincide with the start of Azerbaijan's rotating chairmanship of the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers. We hope you will use the visit to urge the Azerbaijani government to take specific steps to improve its human rights record and bring it into line with Council of Europe standards.

The Azerbaijani government's poor human rights record regarding freedom of expression, assembly, and association has worsened sharply in the past two years, particularly in the lead-up to the October 2013 presidential elections, and the situation has shown no sign of improving. The authorities have arrested and imprisoned dozens of political activists and government critics, broken up peaceful public demonstrations, and adopted legislation that further restricts fundamental freedoms.

In the past year alone, Azerbaijani authorities have engaged in political abuse of the justice system to bring unfounded criminal charges, including narcotics and weapons possession, hooliganism, incitement to violence, and even treason, against at least 30 political activists, journalists, bloggers, and human rights defenders who are critical of the government. Human Rights Watch documented many of these cases in our September 2013 report, "[Tightening the Screws](#)."

Fifteen individuals whose cases we documented in that report are serving prison sentences ranging from two to 10 years on a variety of false charges.

The French Foreign Ministry has rightfully condemned the recent sentencing of Ilgar Mammadov, a prominent political analyst and a chairman of the opposition group REAL (Republican Alternative). As you know, Mammadov and Tofiq Yagublu, deputy chair of the opposition political party Musavat, were [sentenced to seven and five years prison](#), respectively, on bogus charges related to the January 2013 riots in Ismayilli. Consistent with the French MFA's recent critical statement on the conviction of Mammadov, we

encourage you also to call for their immediate release publicly and during your bilateral talks with the authorities.

We would also draw your attention to the ongoing trial of eight pro-democracy youth activists (Shahin Novruzlu, Mahammad Azizov, Bakhtiyar Guliyev, Rashad Hasanov, Rashadat Akhundov, Uzeyir Mammadli, Zaur Gurbanov, and Ilkin Rustamzade), who are facing fabricated charges that they were involved in an alleged plan to instigate violence at a protest in March 2013. They face up to 12 years in prison if convicted.

We also urge you to call for the release of other activists behind bars awaiting trial. They, include:

- [Anar Mammadli](#), chairman of the Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies Centre (EMDS), a leading independent election monitoring group in Azerbaijan that monitored the October presidential vote and concluded that it was neither free nor fair. Mamamdli was arrested in December 2013 on spurious tax evasion, illegal entrepreneurship, misappropriation, abuse of office, and service forgery charges.
- At least four social media activists (Abdul Abdulov, Omar Mammadov, Elvin Karimov, and Elsever Murselli) arrested in the past six months on what appear to be bogus drug possession charges. These four had administered popular Facebook pages that were platforms for criticism about alleged government corruption and human rights abuses.

Yet others are at liberty but face the risk of false criminal charges and imprisonment. For example, in March police arrested Hasan Huseynli, a leading civil society and human rights education activist, but released him two days later pending investigation into criminal charges of hooliganism.

The Azerbaijani government has vigorously denied that there are any politically motivated prosecutions in the country. To support this argument, it has misleadingly referred to the fact that in January 2013 the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) voted against a report on the issue. Yet the government has wrongly ignored a conclusion in the PACE's Monitoring Committee report and resolution, which states that "the combination of the restrictive implementation of freedoms with unfair trials and the undue influence of the executive results in the systematic detention of people who may be considered prisoners of conscience."

The authorities have also maintained an unrelenting campaign of harassment against investigative journalist Khadija Ismayilova, who is known for her extensive reporting on government corruption, including the businesses of the ruling family. Since mid-February, the prosecutor's office has questioned Ismayilova as a witness in investigations into the leaking of state secrets. In 2012 and 2013 she was the target of a media smear campaign involving illegally recorded, explicit images of her.

In addition, the Azerbaijani authorities have introduced legislative amendments that place undue restrictions on civil society organizations, political activists, and the media.

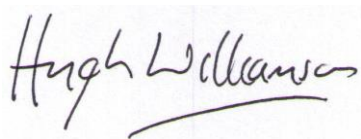
We are concerned that Azerbaijan, despite its obligations as a member state of the Council of Europe and a state party to the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (ECHR), has consistently failed to comply with its obligations to respect the rights to freedom of expression, association, and assembly.

We hope that in the lead-up to and during your visit, you will convey your profound concern about these cases and urge President Aliyev to have politically motivated charges withdrawn and to release individuals who are being prosecuted in retaliation for the peaceful exercise of their fundamental rights. We also hope you will call on the authorities to repeal regressive legislative amendments that restrict work of civil society and impede enjoyment of freedom of expression and assembly. In this difficult context, we believe you should make clear that closer political and economic relations with France will be conditioned on Azerbaijan respecting and implementing the rights of its own people in full accordance with its international human rights treaty obligations.

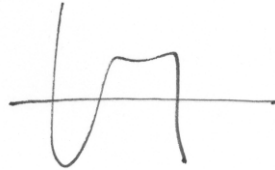
As both of you are leaders of Council of Europe member states, we hope you will convey to the Azerbaijani leadership a concern about your shared values that that membership implies, particularly at a time when Azerbaijan is taking over the rotating chairmanship.

We thank you for your attention.

Sincerely,



Hugh Williamson  
Director  
Europe and Central Asia Division



Jean Marie Fardeau  
Director  
Paris Office